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Paton, John Brown

How to restore the  
vigorous...

Manchester

1901

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**How to Restore the**  
**Vigorous Yeoman-Peasantry**  
**of England.**



An Address delivered to the Co-operative Society of Leeds

BY THE

**Rev. J. B. PATON, M.A., D.D.**



Manchester:

ISSUED BY THE CO-OPERATIVE UNION LIMITED, LONG MILLGATE.

1901.

"The Principle of Co-operation is so well adapted to Agriculture that it is certain someday to be applied to that particular branch of Industry with the most beneficial results."—

RIGHT HON. HENRY FAWCETT, M.P.

## How to Restore the . . . Vigorous Yeoman-Peasantry Of England. . . .



An Address delivered to the Co-  
operative Society of Leeds by the  
Rev. J. B. Paton, M.A., D.D. . .



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## I.

Thema: 1.07.2012

tillage into pasturage that needs no such labour, from which fact it arises that two millions of acres have thus been laid down during the last twenty years, and the pasture lands of England now amount to one-half of all the land under cultivation; and, lastly, the growing discontent of country folk, caused by the new, and I may call it the democratic spirit of the age, that cannot brook the dull monotony and servile customs of a labourer's life, but seeks the freedom and the fuller social life that are dreamed of as attainable in our larger towns and cities.

The second fact to which I refer is more momentous even than the first. During the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, by far the greater part of rural England was *owned* and tilled by yeomen farmers and peasants, some of them holding by freehold, but the great majority by copyhold. The old feudal charges and the offerings in land formerly paid to the great over-lords had been commuted into money payments, which, from the great depreciation of silver during those years, were reduced to a nominal value. Even the cottars had four acres of land attached to each cottage, which they also held by a fixed tenure at a nominal rent, whilst they had, along with the yeomen farmers and peasants, the rights of pasturage and of the in-gathering of wood over seven millions of acres of common land and of open woodland which have since been almost wholly enclosed.

England was thus, during those centuries, held and cultivated by a splendid type of men, who owned their own land and tilled it with their own hands; men who were made strong in body by healthy labour, and who had the virile temper and the freedom of spirit which grow naturally from such independence and industry. The history of those great centuries of Agincourt, of the Armada, and of Marston Moor, is largely explained by the character of the men who then dwelt in rural England and formed the bulk of its population.

Now, the whole of this order of men has been exterminated. Mr. Cliffe Leslie tells us of a scanty remainder in Westmoreland, and Mr. Fawcett of a still smaller

remainder in Lincolnshire. But the dalesmen of Westmoreland and the mossmen of Lincolnshire will not number to-day 200 men, or at the most 300, and they are the sole survivals of as noble a class of men as ever peopled any country. The history of their extinction, which is owing to many and complex causes, has been detailed for us by Cliffe Leslie, Thorold Rogers, and Shaw Lefevre; but it is, so far as I know, most succinctly told by Emile de Laveleye in the last edition of his great book on "The Primitive Forms of Property," in a chapter which I have asked a friend to translate.\* The fact remains, and it is of immense significance, that England, which was once, of all the countries of Europe, the richest in men who occupied and tilled their own land, is now, of all countries in Europe, the poorest in this class of men. There is no other country in the world where the ownership of land is so absolutely divorced from its occupancy and its cultivation; and there is no country in the world where the land is held by so small a number of owners. In England one-half of the whole land is possessed by 2,250 landlords, and two-thirds of Scotland is owned by 250 great landlords. This fact is, doubtless, one which not only occasions economic and social evil, but gives rise to political disquiet, and even to political danger; for, as Laveleye says: "To make the possession of land a close monopoly, and at the same time to increase the political power of those who are inexorably excluded from it, is at once to provoke revolutionary measures of equalisation, and to render them easy."

## II.

Based on these two facts there are four important considerations which I briefly urge. They have, indeed, a larger outlook upon national issues which are not now before us, but they also bear directly upon the question I am discussing in this paper.

\* The "History of Landed Property in England." A chapter of Emile de Laveleye's work—"De la Propriété et ses Primitives Formes," translated by Mrs. W. B. Thorpe, and published by J. Clarke and Co., 13, Fleet Street, London, E.C.

1. Practically the whole of the industrial population of this country is now reduced to the condition of weekly wage-earners. They are solely dependent upon their weekly wages, and have no security beyond. Many of them, indeed, are partially protected by their trade unions and benefit societies; but, in a great industrial crisis, or in a time of war, thousands of these weekly wage-earners might be thrown out of employment, homeless and penniless. I confess that if I were an artisan the one anxiety that would haunt my life would be the sense of insecurity in my lot, and the thought that by some vicissitude of trade, without any act or fault of my own, my weekly wage might instantly cease, and no other opening for my labour be found; I should always thus hear the baying of the Hunger-wolf, even if it were at a distance, and should often see the gaunt spectre of the workhouse darkening for me what should be the golden light of the eventide of life. I know well the provision that is being honourably made by great multitudes of working men to obviate these evils. But these very efforts show how deeply the sense of insecurity is felt by them, and I have no doubt that it is this "torment of fear," more than any other cause, which gives shape and spur to those socialistic tendencies which agitate and, I may say, dominate our time.

Now contrast with the condition of our whole industrial population depending on weekly wages the condition of things in France, where, as the Hon. Mr. Brodrick, Warden of Merton College, Oxford, quoting from M. Laverge, tells us, there were, before the loss of Alsace and Lorraine, about five million proprietors owning seven-and-a-half acres of land each on the average, and another half million owning seventy-five acres on the average. Let us remember, too, that in Germany the great statesman Von Stein accomplished peacefully what had been done by the Revolution in France, and established large bodies of peasant proprietors in the different provinces of that country. Thus in the small kingdom of Württemberg we find 260,000 peasant owners with less than five acres each, and 160,000 with over five acres

each. Think, then, in those countries, what a sense of security, of independence, and of comfort, is possessed by those millions of families, who constitute more than half the population, having their own land, which yields them a sure maintenance, and which is their safe provision for old age.

2. Mr. Charles Booth, in his great work on the London poor, has shown us that the young men who come from the country find no difficulty, because of their greatly superior strength, in procuring work. It is the feebler men of city growth who fall into the lowest class of the poor bordering upon the dismal haunts of crime and pauperism. The policemen of London and of our great cities are mainly recruited from our country districts, where, still, country life, with its healthy labours and its simple but nourishing food, maintains the physique of those who dwell there. It will be an evil day for England if that well-head of splendid physical energy and prowess fail to yield its supply, and if our towns cease to be replenished by the robust physical forces drawn from a healthful and abounding country population. How, indeed, shall order be kept in our towns if our stalwart and kindly-natured policemen bred in the country, fail us?

3. Another aspect of this question is more serious still. Sir James Blyth, President of the Dairy Association, has reminded us that the consumption of wheat in the British Isles is 32,000,000 quarters annually, and that of this amount 24,000,000 come from abroad, for which at present prices, nearly £40,000,000 sterling is paid. Beyond this, however, and in addition to the enormous quantities of live and dead meat imported, about £40,000,000 sterling is sent out each year for butter, milk, cheese, poultry and eggs, fruit and vegetables, so that we have this result—that at the present time the food imported into this country averages £4 per head of the population, whilst in Germany, the country that comes nearest to us, they only pay a little over 7s. per head for their food imports—a wide and most lamentable difference.

I cannot think that this is a very safe or even tolerable state of things—to be so absolutely dependent for mere sustenance upon foreign supplies, which might, in some very conceivable contingencies during a great war, be for a time summarily stopped. We have, I believe, only three months' supply of wheat from abroad in our stores at any time. Imagine, therefore, what suffering and almost certain revolution would befall this country if our supply of food were by any mischance cut off even for a little while.

Now can England supply itself with the provisions needed by her large population? This is almost the problem of problems to-day. I believe that to a large extent England could produce the food necessary for her present population by the combination of two large productive forces.

The first of these is the "thorough cultivation" of the land by spade industry. I do not need to recite the evidence given before the Commission upon Small Holdings, or in Mr. Thornton's book upon Peasant Proprietors, or in recent literature by General Cotton and Mr. Sowerby. The fact is patent in all our market gardens, and in the allotments which now fortunately abound, upon many of which produce to the value of £20, or even £30, is raised upon one acre every year. The philosophy of this amazing fertility—caused by hand-husbandry—is simple; by such industry the depth of the tilth and the mass, therefore, of the productive soil are increased, and often doubled—the spade going one-half deeper and often twice as deep as the plough. And further, in such thorough cultivation the land is more frequently turned over, and is thus thoroughly aerated, and exposed to the fertilising influences of the sun and the atmosphere. When it is remembered that 95 per cent of all the elements that constitute plant life are drawn from the atmosphere, it will be seen how the health and fertility of the land depend upon the amount of air which it assimilates and contains.

The second great productive force is that which Arthur Young has called "*the magic of property*," which turns

sand into gold;" or, as he further explains the meaning of that phrase, "put a man into precarious possession, and he will turn a garden into a desert; but put him into a state in which he can securely anticipate the fruits of his labours, and he will turn a desert into a garden." Let it be remembered that the parts of the soil that are of any value are eminently destructible, but are also eminently capable of rapid development and increase.

Now, many will say that by the combination of these two productive forces, applied to the soil of England, its productions can be increased three-fold or four-fold; I limit myself to saying, and I believe that the statement is incontrovertible, that they can be doubled. What an increase of wealth and comfort is at once suggested by this doubling of England's resources drawn from its soil! And what a security is given against the possible danger (which it is a horror to contemplate) of want inflicted by the stoppage from any cause of our present food supplies!\*

\* Since writing this I have read an important article on the Food Supply of the United Kingdom in the Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, for March, 1900, which shows conclusively, indeed to mathematical demonstration, that in order to produce all the food stuffs that are now imported into this country, the productivity of the soil will need not to be doubled but only increased one-half. Expressed in terms of acres, and on the assumption that one acre yields thirty bushels of wheat, the production of all food commodities imported into this country would require the following number of acres:—

	ACRES.
Wheat imported would require for production ..	5,979,000
Beef " " " ..	4,108,000
Mutton " " " ..	2,176,000
Milk " " " ..	4,643,000
Feeding Stuffs, mainly for conversion into meat and milk .....	6,093,000
	22,999,000

Or, in round figures, 23 millions of acres.

Now, the total area of land and water in the United Kingdom is 77,671,000 acres, and the acreage under crops and grass is 47,900,000 acres. If, then, these 47,900,000 acres were so cultivated as to produce one-half more, that would equal, or a little more than equal, the present production of 23 millions of acres, and would therefore produce all that is now imported.



4. The last consideration I urge is, to me, by far the most important. Hallam tells us, in words which, in substance, I recall, "It was the proud independency of the noble stock of our free yeomen, that tempered with such virile energy our national character, and that has inspired with so much liberty our constitution." Laveleye says:—"It was the free yeomen of England who gave her her mighty force, and who conquered the chivalry of France during the long 'hundred years' war' of the fifteenth century;" and Shaw Lefevre, in his last book, when saying that it was the boast of England that she had so large a body of peasant yeomen, adds, what has long been familiar to some, but should never be forgotten by any, "that the armies of Cromwell were mainly recruited from this class." And so I may add that it was by these peasant yeomen that the priceless liberties we now enjoy were secured.

I quote these three sentences to show the noble type of character that is formed among a class of hard-working, thrifty, and independent farmers, owning the land they till. Robust and hardy of body they will be, because of their healthful outdoor labour and their simple country habits; intelligent also they will be, especially in our time, because they conduct their own affairs and must apply exact knowledge and varied skill to the manifold industries of the farm. But there are other elements of character indicated in the quotations I have given, which are yet more important. We know the seriousness of thought that comes to men who labour, apart, amid the great forces and scenes of nature, and the strong individuality that is often stamped upon their lives. Living, too, on land which is their own, these men are bound to be men of sturdy independence, native to the air of freedom. I feel sure, therefore, that such men will be likely to be religious in spirit, and to be earnest in work for the Church as well as for the State. I believe, with the deepest conviction, that if we re-plant yeomen of the olden type, who will at the same time be enriched with the benefits of modern science, of education, and of social fellowship, we shall restore to England the very noblest type of citizens—men earnest, moral, and religious.

### III.

These considerations lead me, and I hope will lead you, greatly to desire the restoration of a large body of peasant or yeomen farmers to our English lands.

And now in most rapid outline I must sketch the plan by which it may be done.

1. Let me say *first* that the time is opportune. Large farms are now crumbling into small farms. The small farmer who works his own farm is found to bear best the strain of modern competition. The advantages of spade industry and the thorough cultivation which it ensures, and of peasant ownership, are now being widely recognised, and are believed by many to promise a solution of many dark social problems. In some parts of Europe great landed estates are now undergoing dissolution, being broken up into small farms, to be occupied and cultivated by their new owners. In Eastern Prussia the State has even formed State Banks in order to facilitate this healthful disintegrating process. And in our own country the same movement begins to stir. Land is now in many places wonderfully cheap, and is offered freely for sale as never before.

2. But, *secondly*, the settlement of men upon the land must be done in no piecemeal and witless fashion, but must be carefully organised under conditions that will ensure success. Amongst these conditions the chief seems to be that men be settled in groups or colonies in order that wherever settled they may have the full enjoyment of social fellowship, stimulus, and pleasure, that they may receive the advantages of general education for their families, and of the best technical instruction and guidance for themselves, and, above all, that they may reap the measureless benefits of co-operation, which will enhance the value of their labour and proportionately increase their profits.

3. In the *third* place, such a colony, containing in itself the full powers and advantages of social and of communal life, need not be planted near a station or a town. It may, therefore, occupy land which, while most suitable and convenient for them, will be vastly

cheaper because of its distance from the railway. It will command the facilities of railway transit for the prompt deliverance of its commodities by means of a motor car, or, as in the case of the Lincoln Co-operative Farm—which is situated some miles from Lincoln—by means of an "express" vehicle running twice a day.

4. Again, a farm, to be thoroughly cultivated by spade industry, must be small. An able workman can effectively treat some five or six acres; and if two or three other acres be added for pasturage we find that eight acres of average soil will suffice for each occupier. This seems pitifully inadequate if we think of the usual style of farming, where three acres of pasturage are required for one cow, and where the best wheat crop will yield only from thirty to forty bushels per acre. But not such is the varied and thorough cultivation of farms that are fertilised by the spade husbandry of their owners. One acre of land thus worked—and the sweat of the husbandman is the best fertiliser—will often suffice for the keep of one cow by the growth of succulent vegetables and of green crops which are preserved and ripened in the silo; so that the small farmer with his eight acres can have four or five cows and yet have abundant room for the growth of wheat and other cereals, and for those minor industries in which the small farmer excels, and in which the wife and children of the farmer find healthful employment, whilst they contribute their share to the income of the household.

The Danes have shown how the very best pork can be most profitably produced in association with dairying; and it is by the rearing of poultry, of game, and of rabbits, by bee-keeping, and by the production of eggs, that all the waste and neglected products of the farm can be used and turned to the most profitable account; whilst the cultivation of flowers, fruits, and vegetables, which are largely perishable articles, will supply advantageously our home markets.

5. Now let me put all that I have said into a concrete illustration, subject, of course, to modifications from the different conditions found in different districts.

Land suitable for such a colony may be purchased at £10 an acre. An estate of 400 acres will form, as we have seen, a colony of fifty farms and families. The price, therefore, of each farm will be £80, but as one-fourth of the value of the estate will need to be expended in the making of roads and in the dividing of the separate farms, the capital value of each farm will be £100. If, therefore, the colonist holds under a permanent lease as a copyholder he will need only to pay £4 as rent to yield interest on the £100. If the land cost £20 an acre, the capital value will be £180, on which the interest would be a little more than £7. There must, however, be a small additional charge. The commune or colony must be its own landlord, and will, as a landlord, have to maintain its estate in order, and execute such works as are needed for the public good. Probably £1 per annum must be added as a communal charge to the £4 or the £7 paid by the copyholder. Such a burden would be by no means grievous to be borne.

Each occupier must have a capital averaging £8 per acre, which indeed would be all too small but for the assistance of the Mutual Credit Bank, which, it seems to me, must be an integral and essential part of the constitution of the colony.

Now, I deal with what has hitherto been the one great bar to the extension of Small Holdings, namely, the erection of suitable buildings. And here, let me say, first, that in many parts of England cottages are now empty, and available for the immediate use of such peasant owners of the land. The late Mr. Sharp, of Sleaford, erected a strong and capacious farmstead for a farm of seventeen acres at the small cost of £37. 10s., and he set forth the details of the expenditure in *The Rural World*, six years ago. Sir Pierce Edgumbe, who purchased and divided a farm of 300 acres into 25 holdings, at Rew, near Dorchester, published a most interesting account of the success of his colony in a periodical called *The Country Gentleman* for January, 1898. The article is illustrated by numerous pictures showing the remarkable ingenuity and dexterity with

which these small holders erected buildings for themselves—a fact not surprising to those of us who have seen the dwelling-houses erected on the garden allotments near our Midland towns, or who know what has been done by the settlers in our Colonies. I have seen copies of a plan for a comfortable cottage home and farmstead which has been drawn up after most careful inquiry as to the most convenient and economical arrangements both for the home and the steading. This can be erected for about £200. And if the Mutual Credit Bank be formed of which I spoke, much of the money required for this building may be advanced by the bank.

6. It will be seen what importance I attach to the formation of a Co-operative Credit Bank in every colony. Co-operative Credit Banks have spread most rapidly over many European countries, and have brought, as no other simple agency that I know of has brought, economic comfort and moral discipline to the communities in which they are established. The principle of these banks is briefly this: a labouring man has no security of the kind an ordinary bank requires, but if planted on a colony he has his strong body fit for labour, and the opportunity assured to him for constant and most profitable industry. The members of the colony mutually pledge this valuable security for one another, and every loan that is advanced to one of its members is advanced by a committee of the colonists themselves, *i.e.*, by neighbours who know and approve of the object for which the loan is sought, and who are careful to see that the loan is properly and advantageously used. These banks, which now are numbered by thousands, have stood the stress of war and of agricultural depression as no other banks have done, and are now becoming throughout Europe the very safest places of investment.

7. The bank, however, is but one example, though the very chief, of the subtle and manifold uses of co-operation, by which I have said the value of the labour of each member of the colony is immeasurably enhanced. The immense advantages of co-operation are seen in the purchase by wholesale of commodities to be used on

the farm or in the household. I heard of one instance in which a co-operative society of farmers near Limerick purchased artificial manure in the first wholesale market to the value of £5,000, which, if they had purchased it separately at the retail shops in their neighbouring villages, would have cost them £13,000. The advantage of co-operation is seen also in the production of commodities. It is impossible for the small farmer to produce regularly butter of the highest quality, and of a constant standard, so as to secure the best markets and the highest price, but this can be done infallibly in the co-operative dairy. It is, however, in the marketing of produce that co-operation has its chief value, as commodities can then be prepared and despatched in quantities that will command the most convenient and profitable markets, and can be packed in bulk so as to insure the cheapest railway rates.

8. Now in my last sentence I name an element which is of the greatest importance as likely to bring success to these home colonies, and to place on them the crown of comfort. It is the organisation of indoor industries to supplement the outdoor work of the farm. You know that for perhaps fifty days in the year, with our inclement weather, the farm is inaccessible, and cannot be worked; and there are the long dark winter evenings when nothing can be done outside the house. Now for these days and these evening hours some indoor industry is required; and the produce of this indoor industry gives the increment of wealth which fills the home with abundance and with comfort. You remember how a Swiss pastor introduced wood-carving into his Alpine village to occupy the long winter nights in the chalets of his people, and to increase their scanty earnings. That industry has now spread over the Alpine hamlets of Switzerland, and yields to that country more than a million a year. Besides this, goods are now despatched from London houses to be embroidered in those Alpine villages, and the goods are returned to this country for sale. Linen and calico, muslin and lawn, thus make the foreign tour, though they could surely be as easily

and cheaply embroidered in the homes of our peasantry at home.

Let me entreat you all to read the report of the Recess Committee for Ireland, one of the most statesmanlike and practical productions of our time. You will there see what wonders have been wrought in other lands, and how the social and material comforts of people in country districts have been raised and enriched, by multiplying those art industries which can be carried on at home. One example I give which is not found in that report. In the Erzgebirge and Riesengebirge of Bohemia, a vast district extending more than 200 miles, the soil and the people alike were exceedingly poor. But a Committee was formed at Prague to establish in every village and district a special home industry, for which technical instruction was provided and markets were opened, so that, exactly as in Württemberg and other countries, a people whose economic condition was as low as that of the poorest district in Ireland, has been elevated into a condition of prosperity and comfort. The special value of these home industries, which must be established wherever a colony of yeomen or peasant proprietors is formed, consists in this, that they are all art industries, and impart therefore a certain refinement to those who work in them. They are also industries in which all the members of the family can be united, so that they not only add to the wealth and the grace of the home, but they cement the home by the pleasant fellowship and the common interests of an industry in which parents and children alike may share.

It is by measures such as I have thus briefly sketched that I think Colonies may be established everywhere in England full of healthful and happy families. I wish that our Co-operative Societies should go forth to sow the seed of such Colonies in every part of our land.

#### IV.

In conclusion, let me say how I think the great Co-operative Societies of England may assist in this important national work. And I plead with them to render this

service—not only because of the great economic and moral issues that are involved in this restoration to our English land of our vigorous English yeomen, but also because of the paramount place that co-operation must hold in this national movement. I desire, accordingly, that a strong Committee representing in a sense the Co-operative Societies of England be formed of shrewd, practical, earnest men; which will work in conjunction with the English Land Colonisation Society. That society has been established in order to press this question upon the public mind; and to enlist the service of public bodies like the Co-operative Societies, in educating public opinion and in organising co-operative colonies of yeomen-farmers holding the land in communal ownership so as to give them secure permanent tenure. It can, however, accomplish its work only by the help of auxiliary committees, such as I desire our Co-operative Societies to form.

This committee representing co-operative societies should be a pioneer committee for the purposes of propaganda and organisation. Its first object will be to hold meetings, setting forth the urgency of the work it has undertaken and the methods by which that work can be fulfilled. The committee will also distribute leaflets everywhere, especially amongst the rural branch co-operative societies, giving with some detail the advantages and methods of co-operative colonies so as to interest and inform those members of rural societies who have already invested some money in their societies, and who are therefore ready now to rise upward to the higher rank of English yeomen. These leaflets will show how as yeomen-farmers they will, in co-operative colonies of small holders, develop the great powers, and reap the rich fruits, of co-operation.

As soon as in any district a number of labourers and others are ready to form themselves into a co-operative body that will occupy land as a co-operative colony, the committee, in alliance with the English Land Colonisation Society, will endeavour to find land suitable—convenient in situation, and economical in price—for such a colony;

and will assist, along with representatives of the intending body of colonists, in the making of roads, in the division of the farm into separate holdings, and in the allocation of these holdings. For the purchase of such a farm, it may be hoped that some of the wealthy co-operative societies will advance sufficient capital, as it would be a secure investment. If, however, this be not done, there need be no difficulty in obtaining capital otherwise. The farm may be mortgaged in the usual way for two-thirds of its value, and the remainder could be obtained by a second mortgage, which will be secured not only by the value of the land itself, but by the capital which the owners of the colony will immediately spend in the purchase of implements and stock, the erection of buildings, and in the improvement of the land.

Each body of holders thus settling on the land would become a co-operative society for the purposes of both production and of distribution. It would receive commodities required for the farm as well as for the home from the Wholesale Society as other co-operative societies do; and it would produce market produce which would be available for distribution by the various societies in large towns. There would thus arise a still higher form of co-operation in this natural alliance between town and country. The productions of the co-operative colony of small holders will provide food supplies to be distributed by the town co-operative societies, and in return they will purchase and use articles of clothing, &c., manufactured by co-operative bodies in our towns.

I believe that in the way which I have described a number of co-operative colonies may be speedily and naturally established in different parts of the country, and that these colonies will restore under the best conditions the yeoman-peasantry of England, and will secure the priceless blessings I have set forth in this address to the yeomen and their families, to their country, and to their race.



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